



IDENTITY CRISIS AND DIASPORA IN JUMPA LAHIRI'S DEBUT NOVEL "THE NAMESAKE"

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri is famous as the acclaimed chronicler of the Bengali-immigrant experience. Jhumpa Lahiri fictional characters reflected on the one hand their attachment to the motherland and on the other, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness. This present paper deals with her debut novel *The Namesake* which deals with theme of emotional and cultural struggle and dual identity crisis of Indian families who settled in abroad. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss finds vivid description in *The Namesake*.

KEYWORDS: : Diaspora, Identity, Rootlessness, Description, Motherland.

INTRODUCTION

The word 'diaspora' derived from the Greek word diaspeiro, literally means scattering or dispersion of the people from their homeland. Diaspora writing has emerged as a distinct genre. A large number of people have migrated from India to various countries. Some of them have made mark in the field of writing. These immigrant writers reflect, on the one hand their attachment to the motherland and on the other, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss finds expression in their writings. Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, Bharathi Mukharjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banarjee, A K Ramanujan etc are eminent diasporic/expatriate writers. This present paper deals with Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the eminent expatriate writer's novel *The Namesake*.

Jhumpa Lahiri is famous as the acclaimed chronicler of the Bengali-immigrant experience. Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration in acknowledged as one of eminent women writers in Indian English literature. Her debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize and a PEN/Hemingway award. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003), a major national best seller, was named the New York magazine book of the year. Lahiri's second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), was achieved the rare distinction of debuting at number one on The New York Times best seller list. In 2013, her novel *The Lowland* has been long listed for the Man Booker Prize.

Jhumpa Lahiri dealt with various contemporary issues in her own unique style. Her concerns are global concerns as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, globalization, capitalism, terrorism, cultural identity etc. Her award winning novel *The Namesake* (2004) is considered to be one of the best fictions written about immigrant life. In *The Namesake*, Ashima represent the feeling of being dishoused, not knowing where they really belong. The vital question for them is that of identity and their ongoing quest for it.

The Namesake – A Struggle for identity

The Namesake is a novel about an Indian family moved to United States. The novel shows two generations of Gangulis and their struggles with the move. The novel also exposed Jhumpa Lahiri's subjective approach to immigration and exile. A reconsideration of the major characters' predicament in this book – Ashok, Ashima, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi unfolds the high intensity psychological disturbance and uprooting they live with. The characters in the novel suffer from cultural clash as well as identity crisis. The novel portrays the second generations cultural dilemma, youngsters desire to fit into the alien culture so different from that of their parents. Ashok and Ashima are more prone to these clashes. As they have spent most of their life in India, they feel more attracted to their ancestral land than this new adopted land. Gogol, who is born in America, makes several American friends and is more adoptable to the surrounding world. All these characters are neither fully Indian nor American, instead they exist somewhere in between these two worlds. The cultural customs, ideas and habits that are inherently present in every person cannot be substituted with the customs and ideas of other person, but due to the prevailing situation one has to adopt the new customs as a mid-way between two extremes.

The novel commences with Ashima's painful pregnancy and child bearing abroad culminates in Ashima's final decision to divide the rest of her life between India and America. However, the fear of losing Bengali culture secretly torments her. Feminine characters undergo this trauma of exile more than masculine characters. Ashima, in the 'The Namesake' presents fear of loss of identity in the host culture. Ashima exemplifies woman's conformist attitude to the patriarchy.

She espouses the patriarchal niche of woman as a preserver of indigenous culture. Through her traumatic labor pain, her acute feeling of isolation and her memories of Calcutta, Lahiri presents her at two levels: as a 'women' and as a 'mother'. In America Ashima cannot imagine giving birth to her child in the hospital without being cared by her mother, grandmother or aunt. Lying in the hospital, she wonders, "If she is the only Indian person in the hospital..." (3)

Ashima even tries to retain her Bengali culture in that new land. While making efforts to preserve 'home culture' the first generation immigrants train their children in the native language. Ashima teaches Gogol,

To memorize a four-line children's poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities.

Adorning the ten headed Durga during puja (Lahiri, TNS 54)

Gogol Ganguli- novelist reflects clear and lucid account of the predicament of Gogol. The oddness of his name and becomes burden for him. As he grows up his identity crisis begins. His school principal finds his name strange to pronounce. His classmates tease him. He decided to change his name Gogol to Nikhil Gogol Ganguly. He believed that switching his name would erase all complications. Gogol is the representative of the identity crisis felt by most diaspora children who are born in foreign countries. At home followed Indian culture while in public the American code of conduct. In his adolescence, he desires to blend in the American society. Even though he born in America, racially alien to that land. So there is struggle between two cultures. Parents wish to raise Gogol and Sonia with Bengali culture but they grow up relating to their surrounding culture in USA. Despite the efforts of Ashima to keep him Indianized, Gogol behaves like his American friends. He lived just like Native Americans. Though he changed his name he failed to come out from identity crisis.

Ashoke, Gogol's father, is also an important figure in the story. He is a defining character both for the family and for Gogol as the protagonist. His accident in the train in India, his decision and effort in moving to America and his death in America are three ways in which he is important to the novel. Ashoke as an Indian young man moves to America after a suggestion given to him by a stranger on the train in India who had the experience of living in England for a while: Although, this meeting was short - the man died in the train accident a few hours after they met- the idea given to Ashoke remained with him until he eventually made the journey to America together with his wife. After the train accident, he envisioned another sort of future. He imagined walking away from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died. He goes abroad to fulfill his desire. We notice that in order to achieve his dream, he has to suffer from the pangs of separation. His family also has to endure the pain of separation. Infact, Ashok's split life is a documentary of immigrant experience of loss and longing.

CONCLUSION

In short, Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully carves out the dilemma of immigrants and parents, their dilemma. The diasporic crisis of dual identity faced by Ashima and Gogol in more intensified manner. But Gogol's dilemma finally get resolved when he realizes that his identity is embellished by both cultures. So he is no longer ashamed of himself. Jhumpa Lahiri presented the conflict of generations in a sophisticated manner.

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